

Q: Good afternoon. Today is May 3rd, 2016. My name is Nikki and I'm here at the Falls at Cordingly Dam with Don Laliberte?

A: Laliberte.

Q: Laliberte. And together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So, Don, what were you doing before you entered the service or what was life like for you before you entered the service?

A: Before I entered the service I was just graduated from high school. And I come from a very large family. There is eight of us. I've got two brothers that were in the Marine Corps before, prior before I went into the service. One was stationed in Cuba. The other one was stationed in Vietnam itself. So, again I get the little notice in the mail from Uncle Sam saying, "We want you." Draft notice, which they don't have that today.

So, I was hesitating, what am I going to do, go in for a couple years in the service, being drafted, or join the Air Force. I said, "Well, maybe I'm better on the ground than trying to fly a plane." So, I got drafted, went into the service, went down to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where you have your AIT training. Then from there I went out to Fort Leonard, Missouri. I had more training. Then I get a one-way ticket to a country called Vietnam.

Now we have to remember Vietnam started back in 1954 with American advisors that President Eisenhower sent over there at that time. And it ended in 1975, so it was a 20 year hitch that we fought that conflict. It was never declared a war, but it was declared a conflict. So, during that, again I was a young guy, I was married, I was hesitating what to do. Again I had tons of cousins, to be very honest with you, they all fled off to Canada, because that is part of my nationality. So,

should I do that or should I be like my other two brothers and fought for my, fight for my country? And I decided to stick it out and fight for my country.

But going back to where I got, I was in California, Oakland, California, and I got orders to go over to Vietnam, but it took 16 weeks before they could ship me over to Vietnam. That's how many troops were being sent over there at that time. They would go over to Vietnam and land into a small little village called Can Tho, which is south, down in the depth in Vietnam. Which I was there, then I was flown to another small base on an island called Fuqua Island, which is, if you look at the map of the country of Vietnam and you look at the very bottom there is a little island. It's like the size of Martha's Vineyard, and that's where they had 50,000 prisoners, Viet Cong prisoners that the, what they called the [00:03:07] was protecting, and my job was to make sure to train the military police, the South Vietnamese military police how to treat the Viet Cong.

Well, I'm not going to get into the nitty-gritty of the whole thing. It's a different world that we live in today, thank God, because now there is laws against how you treat prisoners, and I'm glad that is there. But I was there and it taught me a lot. I was scared. Okay. Every day you live, every day was a new day, so you try to not think what is going to happen down the road, what is going to happen next week. You just you get up in the morning, do what you have to do, and hopefully you didn't get shot at or there weren't bombs coming in or rockets coming in, and you did what you had to do.

I met a lot of good people there, which again we lost 58,000 Americans in that war, which I feel bad about, because they will never come back, they will never come home. And it just, even to this day I feel bad about it. Again to make a long story short, I also, I went back, and this is something I definitely have to mention, I went back 14 months ago to visit after 44 years, and all the 10 different cities and towns. I took 15 minutes out to say a little prayer for all the military people that we had that lost their lives that never came home, and I feel bad for their parents, I feel bad for their families.

But Vietnam was a different, different, an education that I will never forget. It's just hot, dirty, dusty, rainy. You're being shot at all the time. You don't know who is shooting at you. You're ducking. You're hoping that you don't get hit. We would be going on convoys to build roads and bridges and they would get blown up the next day. And it's so sad, you used to have these little kids that used to come and try to sell you water or soda on the side of the street, and there would be a way that they would put broken glass in it so that if you drank it it would cut the inside of your body. And every day you would lose somebody in your platoon. It's just I don't know how I made it back.

Just with the tons of letters that were sent to me from my parents and mail call that we got every day, and there was guys over there that never received one ounce of mail in their life. I mean it just kept you going, kept you going, kept you going.

Would I go back and do it again to fight for my country? Yes I would. Would I advise young people to go back and do it? It's got to be a good reason to get into the war and to fight, because you're giving up your life. You may not come back. We see that today in many conflicts. But I would go back. I believe in the cause that we were there for, even though we came home and it was a different world when we came home. I mean look how many years it took for them to recognize the Vietnam veterans.

We do have benefits coming to us. We're entitled to those benefits, which nobody wanted to let us know about the benefits. We went there because we love our country, to fight in that war, even though our country really disrespected us when we came back. They kind of pushed us off to the side of the road, but we still came back, we still fought for our country, still love our country, we still volunteer a lot of services that we do.

Q: That was great. So, do you want to talk a little bit more about how you actually enlisted and why did you choose that specific branch?

A: Well, I was drafted and the reason I was drafted, okay I could have enlisted, like I said, in the Air Force, but I decided two years was a lot quicker than four years, and the Vietnam War was going on. So I said, “Well, I can be home hopefully in two years compared to four years.” And that’s the reason why I decided let me get drafted and get it over with and move forward. So, that’s what made my decision to be drafted instead of enlisting to the service, even though my two brothers both enlisted into the Marine Corps before me.

Q: So, how did you adapt to military life, including the physical regime, the barracks, and the food and the social life?

A: It was a shocking experience. I mean you go in there and again they right off the bat, they get in there and I remember standing in Fort Mason, I thought I was a punkie kid, I could get away with stuff, and they come down the line, “Take your sunglasses off.” They throw your sunglasses off and then you’re in a line with maybe 50, 60 guys, and you get all one type of haircut, you didn’t have your choice. And it’s like you get back to your barracks and it’s like one, two, three, let’s go, and let’s jog around the camp two, three times. And then 4:00 in the morning they come in, wake you up, and knock your bed over. It’s time to get up again. Let’s get out there. Okay let’s run some more. I think I did more running in the service than my whole life.

So it was different. It was a lot of rules and regs that you had to go by and it was a lot of stuff that they really enforce you to obey and listen. They were the boss and you were not and you had no choice in the matter. And you go down to the mess hall, get something to eat. It looked good. You want this instead. You get what they gave you, that was it. And I see now, I look back on that now and I can see why they did it, because in combat you have no choice, you’ve got to do it. You’ve got to get up, you’ve got to move, you’ve got to make it happen, and it trains you to be

tough. It really did. There is some guys that couldn't handle it. They just couldn't handle it. And they shipped them back home. But I figure again, going back to the two years is better than four years, but the two years seemed like 20 years to me at that time.

Q: So, how else did you stay in touch with your family and friends?

A: Just letters, we didn't have texts or email. It was all letters back and forth, writing a letter and putting a stamp on it, sending it home, and again in the service you didn't have a chance to make a call and say, "Hey, Mom, I need new sneakers" or something like that. It's all by mail, all by letters. And the military had a right to open up your mail and see what was going out and what was coming in too. Again I'm going back quite a few years ago, that's when they did that. So that's how we kept in contact.

Q: Okay. And so where exactly did you serve? You said in the village. And then also do you remember arriving and what was it like when you first got there?

A: I first left Oakland, California, we flew into Hawaii for a short stop. From there we went on to Vietnam, landed in Vietnam to an Air Force called Bien Hoa Air Base, north of Saigon. Stayed there and then must have been a good 4,000 troops that landed the same time on different airlines, and then you just waited until you get your orders to go with different Base Commanders to go to your base camp. We got into what they called a deuce and a half, a two and a half ton truck. You pile 60 guys in the back of the truck. Then I went to a little village called Can Tho which is south in the delta in Vietnam. That was my base. Got there in full uniform fatigues. It's 110 degrees out. Carrying the backpack, you go to your base, and all the guys that has been there many years, many months before you are making fun of you, "Hey we got a newbie. Look at this kid. He'll never make it." And stuff like that.

And I remember getting there, getting in my bunk. My bunk was probably two feet wide, maybe six feet long, with what they called a mosquito net over the bunk so that mosquitos wouldn't attack you at night. And I remember sitting there resting, and all of a sudden we got rocketed on by the North Vietnamese. They were shooting us. So I saw, I woke up and I see guys, one guy grabbed me, he said, "Grab your M16. Grab it, head for the bunker." And I saw guys running out the door, running out the door, headed for the bunker. We stayed there the whole night there, staying in the bunker, because they had an M60 machine gun firing back. We didn't know who we're shooting at, but we were shooting at somebody and they were shooting at us.

You could not see the Viet Cong themselves, because they always knew a way how to hide. And I think finally like at 3:00 in the morning we went back to the bunk, and then 5:00, "Come on, chow time," go to chow, "Let's get in line." So it's like, I felt like, "What in the heck am I doing here?" I must have been nuts. I should have gone on to college. I don't know why I didn't. But that from that point on, then I got my assignment to go to an island called, as I said, Fuqua Island, a small little island off the coast of Vietnam in Cambodia, and I was there for about six months in that area there, trying to work with the Viet Cong and building things up and teaching them to treat the enemy a certain way.

Q: So, tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences.

A: Over there I think the most, to this day I can't, I can always recall my getting the mail call at night. They would call your name out, "Hey." They could not pronounce my last name, so they used to call me Frenchie, "Hey, Frenchie, you got a letter from home." "Oh what's wrong, your girlfriend is mad at you?" or make comments and stuff like that. So, I would get these letters and that's what kept me going. It really did.

And I met a lot of good guys there, they were in the same boat, very scared and afraid and living day to day, and you got to be friends with them over the years. To this day I reach out to a couple

of them that came back too. So these are the things that I recall from that conflict. And again, and to see the little kids suffering so much, there is so many little kids over there that they had nothing. They lost their parents. They lost everything they had. And they just opened up to you and it broke your heart, because you would steal food from the mess hall to give the kids some food to eat, okay, or else you take your shirt off, cut it down so they had a shirt to wear. It's just things like that you would never forget.

Q: Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual events?

A: Humor. Not-- It's just everybody was, they're there, and again day to day, and you all joke around, kid around and laugh about this and laugh about that. And it was always, that was your family and you were bonding with your family and getting to know your family. And this one would tell a joke and that one would tell a joke, or somebody would say, "Oh I come from the west coast down in the Dakotas or some darn thing, and this is what we do back there." And we used to make fun of them, "Oh you're a farmer. What the heck do you know?" and stuff like that.

So, we were always kidding around with each other and joking around, and again that got us to survive what we had to go through.

Q: Do you recall the day that your service ended?

A: Yes I do. I do. I recall the day where they came in, my orders came in. I thought I was going to be extended, due to the fact that my MOS was combat engineers, but they didn't and they gave me order to go home. It was December 14th, I believe, 1971. I went home, got on a flight. We got on a plane. We had different airlines, I think Delta Airlines or American Airlines was one of the carriers that brought troops back and forth. We got on a plane. It was a bunch of us. And we just cheered when the plane took off and out of the skies of Vietnam, and then flew up into Alaska. I only had my fatigues on. It was like 20 degrees, freezing, but we were at the airport, then back

down through the west coast, down to Oakland Army Base where we got transferred, got clothes, got cleaned up and everything. And I still had a little bit of time left to do in the service, and then they sent me home for 30 days. And I tell you, it was very hard to just stay home, but I did what I had to do.

Q: So, what was it like to return to civilian life?

A: It was nice. My parents welcomed me very much. My brothers completely understood. I was very upset with my cousins that all fled off to Canada, due to the fact that we had a draft going on. A lot of people did not want to hear about it. That was a conflict. It was a political war that they felt it was the politicians' fault. And of course there was a lot of bad press with Vietnam, with the soldiers being over there where again Lieutenant Kelly was again in the news at that time where he, they claimed he went through a village and slaughtered a whole bunch of kids and everything else. So it was a lot of bad press and a lot of people didn't want to hear your story, didn't want nothing to do with you.

I went to sign up for the VFW Club and the veterans there who were Korean veterans and World War Two veterans, they didn't want anything to do with you. They didn't feel-- Again they felt that you didn't fight in the war, it was a conflict. And so it was heartbreaking. You got no respect, none at all. And again you could apply for a job, "Oh you can't apply here. You're better off to become a police officer, because that's all you guys did was learn how to kill," which was nonsense. So, it was heartbreaking, it really was. I was very, very disappointed and I really felt very disappointed for so many years towards the government and towards the veterans, veterans' agencies and the VA. I felt that way for a long time.

Q: So, how did your service and experience affect your life or your outlook on war and the military just in general?

A: Well, my outlook on war, I don't think we should go into any war, any conflict unless we really know exactly what we're doing. I mean I don't want to see another 58,000 young people die. You've got to have a good reason before you go on to war. You've got to make sure that you do all that you can as far as sitting at a table, roundtable, talking and trying to resolve the issue before you send that young person out there to get killed. That's exactly what you're doing. And that is a very tough job, because that is a tough job for any President to go through, knowing that he should send troops where again their blood will be on his back, on his hands.

The veterans thing, again it wasn't until quite a few years later that I finally got more involved with the veterans and helping other veterans like I do now.

Q: So is there anything else that you just want to tell us?

A: Well, I would just say again it's sad, because I do volunteer my time down at the VA Hospital down in Brockton, again you see so many young people that is there, that come back from the different conflicts that we have now, that they're never going to get out, because there is so many issues, medical issues that they can't. I look at it and I thank God I had a wonderful family that supported me. My wife was terrific. She supported me 100%. I came back. I am considered 100% disabled, because I am affected by Agent Orange, which hopefully I hope I live for another hundred years, but I know deep down inside there is a time limit I'm playing with. And I'm out there, I'm the President of a club called Am Vets, which is American Veterans, and I make sure that our veterans get the services they want with the help they want, with any paperwork that we can do for them to make, to get the benefits that they need.

And again I do a lot of volunteer work with the Brockton VA Hospital, and I feel, I don't get a dime for all this, but I feel good spending 25, 30 hours a week giving back my services to the veterans, because they will never, never, never, any Vietnam veteran that you speak to, they will

never, never allow any other veterans to go through what we went through. They are going to be respected for the service that they have done.

Q: Well, thank you so much, and it looks like our time is just about up. So thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: And I thank you, and I really think it's a wonderful thing that these young people come out and interview us veterans to really understand what the war was all about. I want to thank you, personally thank you.

Q: Well of course. It was wonderful to listen to you.

A: Well that was easy. [Laughter]

Q: That was wonderful.

END OF INTERVIEW